



The Coming Apocalypse

Richard E. Miller

Nice title, eh?

We are fortunate to be living through the greatest change in human communication in human history. This change is bigger and more momentous than our distant ancestors' crawl from the muck to dry land where, over great swaths of time, they came to grunt at one another meaningfully. It is more significant than the invention of the alphabet. It is more important than anything that was set in motion by the grinding gears of the Guttenberg printing press. It is more transformative than the telephone, the television set, and the satellite have been or will ever be.

Obviously, the Internet could never have come into being without these earlier creations. But its communicative powers surpass all the preceding technologies for enabling and enhancing human understanding combined. Right now, anyone of modest intelligence and ambition can make his or her thoughts available via the Internet to a global audience instantaneously and at virtually no cost. While Luddites and historians of science wring their hands over this development and call for caution in assessing the impact of the digital revolution, the World Wide Web proliferates with abandon, leaving in its wake the wreckage of institutions once thought invincible: the newspaper industry, the textbook industry, and the U.S. Postal Service. Indeed, it is fair to say that the Internet provided the infrastructure that has enabled instant global economic collapse. No other means of human communication has ever had the capability to travel so far so quickly to such devastating effect.

Like the Internet, the most pressing problems of our time are all global in scope: in addition to the economic collapse, there is global climate change, the global “war on terror,” the global energy crisis, and the ticking global population time bomb. How do we prepare students to think on such a scale? In such a context, it seems almost ludicrous to ask if writing has a meaningful role to play in the hot, flat, and crowded world that looms in our near future. And yet, although we are living through the greatest change in human communication in human history, you would never know this from visiting language arts classrooms across the country. Far from evolving in relation to the globalization of experience, our teachers, our curricula, and our expectations of education remain frozen in time, preserved like some prehistoric insect in a golden drop of amber.

Last weekend, I helped my eighth-grade daughter with her latest English assignment. She has been working her way through a curriculum that is virtually unchanged since I was in eighth grade more than thirty years ago: *Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *1984*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Pick your own life-changing historic events—Watergate, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Desert Storm, Sarajevo, the Los Angeles riots, 9/11, or what used to be known as the Second Gulf War but is now known as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—whatever you choose will pass through the sieve of the middle-school curriculum without a trace on its way to oblivion. Why study such things, when you can read about the angst of a boy in private school in the late forties, race relations in the fifties, a vision of 1984 (also written in the late forties), or a personal account of the Holocaust from World War II?

The message of the middle-school language arts curriculum is quite clear: literature is a refuge for those who cannot contend with the present. And so, following Anne Frank and Elie Weisel, my daughter’s class watched *Hotel Rwanda*, after which they were assigned the task of composing a letter to the editor about the coverage of genocide. (Yes, they are brought up to the present in one giant step via film, not print.)

A letter to the editor.

About genocide.

Did your class visit Google Earth, where there is an ongoing effort to map the Rwandan genocide? Did you learn about the Genocide Prevention Mapping Initiative that seeks to document all genocides, past and present? The Holocaust Mapping Initiative?

Let me back up. Did you look at anything that was not print or video?

All right then, letter to the editor it is. When the ink dries, we will climb back into our horse and buggy, sealed envelope in hand, and head to the post office, satisfied that we have done our best to voice our disapproval of—what was Bill Clinton’s dodge, the one that allowed the atrocities in Rwanda to unfold in our own time? Oh yeah — “acts of genocide.”

What is writing for?

Let’s begin with the following definition and see how far we can take it: writing is a technology for advancing thought. In this formulation, “advancing” means both “making visible” and “moving forward.” Writing enables us to take the thoughts in our heads and make them visible to ourselves and to others; once our thoughts are visible, writing also provides the means for moving our thoughts forward — through clarification, expansion, qualification, revision, and retraction.

Who is writing for?

The problem that has bedeviled writing instruction since its inception has been the status of the audience. Teachers say over and over to their students, “Think of your audience.” And the students say under their breath, in unison, “We are. It’s you.”

There is, by definition, no real audience for student writing. The abiding fiction of the writing classroom is that students can be fashioned into a proxy audience for the writing produced in that class. Assignments create a writing situation: a letter to the editor, an argument, an act of persuasion, a description. The student work is circulated; discussion of its rhetorical effectiveness occurs — and by “effectiveness” we mean its ability to generate a response in people for whom writing has, by and large, no rhetorical power. The semester ends and all that writing goes to the dump.

And why not? The very obviousness of this solution should give one pause. Why don’t universities preserve the writing solicited from students? Why isn’t there a national archive of student work, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present? Would there be an audience for these materials? Would anyone roam the stacks that, surely, would circle the globe many times over?

It is only with the advent of the Web that such an archive has begun to be assembled. But its purpose is not to provide material either for assessing the effects of writing instruction over time, say, or for tracking shifting conceptions of writing’s value in the academy. Rather, the database that is

continually being amassed by Turnitin.com exists to address the only audience outside the classroom with a lasting interest in student writing: teachers hoping to catch a thief. And, in this instance, one would be hard pressed to say that either the members of this audience or those on staff at Turnitin are actually interested in reading student work. The queries to the database generate the “reading,” such as it is: the audience waits for the “readout,” which reveals whether or not Paper A is, in fact, a version of some other paper already sitting on Turnitin’s servers. In this arena, student writing is not a technology for advancing thought; it is evidence of an irresistible temptation to deceive.

Student writing is not alone in its search of an audience. Over the past two decades, self-sponsored reading has fallen in every age group, according to the trembling prose of the National Endowment for the Arts’ much discussed report, *Reading at Risk*. Novels? Down. Poetry? Down. Drama? Down. (The report predates the explosion in reading in the microgenres of text messages, wall posts to Facebook, tweets, RSS feeds, and scrolling instant messages.)

The only growth area?

Picture the graph: while self-sponsored acts of reading are declining across the board, self-sponsored acts of writing — poems, diary entries, blogs, fan fiction, screenplays — are on the rise. We are becoming a nation of writers in search of an audience. To put this another way, we are becoming a nation for whom writing is nothing more than a tool for self-expression, a way to map the dimensions and the contours of the prison house of identity.

Now, if you take the departmental point of view, everything I have cataloged here is evidence that the forces of destruction are massing on the horizon. And more proof is out there. Print newspapers are moving online or closing altogether. University presses are considering anything to stay in business: weighing marketability as an important criterion during the review process; printing only on demand; getting out of paper altogether and offering only e-books. The public seems to be reading all the time, but largely in 140 character blasts on palm-sized screens. And then there is the collateral damage of the economic collapse, which has in a few short months wiped away tens of billions of dollars in endowment accounts across the country, leaving colleges and universities scrambling for revenue streams that can support basic operations. So, just like that, the perfect storm: more students, who are ever more poorly prepared to work with print, paying more to be in bigger classes with

teachers who trained in an expertise that is no longer valued and, perhaps, not even necessary.

Framed in this way, what remains but feelings of betrayal, sadness, rage, and impotence? Since the advent of postsecondary writing instruction, teachers have bemoaned the sorry state of student composing skills. What distinguishes the current *cris de coeur* from those that defined hallway chatter about the trials of grading student themes in times past is that the anguish now is produced by the real decline in the power of print. David Wiley's recent declaration that universities will be "irrelevant" by 2020 and Mark C. Taylor's *New York Times* op-ed, "End the University as We Know It," are only the two most recent examples of the delight some faculty take in telling others about the academy's failure to change with the times. And in the commentary that followed each of these set pieces, one side weighed in to extol the virtues of research for research's sake and the other side lambasted the willfully obtuse prose that academics prefer, everyone getting a boot in, paying tribute to the alluring fiction that the fate of higher education might be determined through arguments carried out on the Web.

Institutions, though, like economic systems, are remarkably impervious to argument. It is true that higher education is struggling with the paradigm shift, as a universe that had at its center the highly credentialed content expert who generates individually authored print documents fully protected by copyright is being replaced by a universe that has at its center collaborative networks of mentors and learners who work with information freely available on the Web. But it is worth remembering that the *paradigmatic* paradigm shift—from geocentrism to heliocentrism—did not happen in a day. Indeed, it was in 1633 that the Vatican tried Galileo for heresy because of his insistence that the Earth revolved around the Sun, and it was nearly four centuries later, in 1992, that Pope John Paul II stated publicly that the Catholic Church had erred in its treatment of Galileo. So how long can it take an established institution to acknowledge a paradigm shift? You could start the stopwatch with the publication of the *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* in 1632 and stop it with the 2008 declaration of plans to install a statue of Galileo in the Vatican. But then you would need to restart it, because of the announcement in January 2009 that the funds reserved for the statue had been diverted to an educational institution in Nigeria, where they are to be used to foster a better understanding of the "relationship between science and religion," according to a church official. How long? In practical terms, maybe forever.

While officials at the Catholic Church try to decide if Galileo belongs in the Vatican or out in the gardens or scattered to the Earth's four corners, NASA celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Galileo's use of the telescope with a final repair visit to Hubble. In nineteen years orbiting far above the Earth's distorting atmosphere, the Hubble Space Telescope has collected data that are transforming cosmology. An expanding universe? A multiverse? How does one think such thoughts?

I have a confession to make.

I am more interested in creative thought than in critical thinking. I think work in the humanities has been both stimulated and paralyzed by the race to expose the flaws in the conceptual foundations of this or that hermeneutic system. And I might as well admit that I also have difficulty with the larger claim that the primary aim of work in the humanities is to generate knowledge. If you are dealing with work that is either nonfalsifiable or inconsequentially falsifiable, then I would say you are not involved in the generation of knowledge. Rather, you are moving between the realms of belief and subjective experience, tracing the inner landscape that defines our humanity. Finding the limits of what we know is an abiding activity of higher education and an essential part of clearing space and time for future endeavors to better understand the human condition. But equally important is the effort to get to work in that newly cleared space.

My interest in pedagogy is an expression of my desire to find ways into the spaces that have been laid waste by critique, analysis, and argumentation. How, for example, do we build a model for education once the university has been declared a ruin, branded irrelevant, yoked to the dead carcass of the automotive industry and sent careening off a cliff? How do we create a classroom where students are asked to sit with real-world problems, to engage with multiple variables simultaneously, to plunge into the bottomless sea of information that has been unleashed by the World Wide Web?

For those who believe, as I do, that one of the university's primary responsibilities is to promote the acquisition of knowledge in depth, there has never been a more exciting time to be involved in higher education. What the World Wide Web provides is the opportunity to work with the most powerful media of our time on the project of making thought visible. And, of course, the great challenge posed by our technologically saturated time is the punctuation of our movement from moment to moment by distractions that respect no boundaries: text messages, phone calls, and the chime of the inbox. And, too, we work in an environment where the ready availability of information

degrades the value of all information, promotes superficiality, and cedes the official version of any given event to the top link on Google.

Teaching thinking as the process of making and testing connections has always been a wayward, messy, reckless business. (This has been clear since the Platonic dialogues, though the description of Socrates' engagement with his interlocutors as a "method" has occluded this fact.) This is why universities are necessary and will continue to be necessary. The paradigm shift in the nature of human communication has not altered the nature of thought; it has, however, transformed what it means to teach—in ways that have yet to be generally recognized or understood. What will it mean to teach when Internet access is truly ubiquitous? When everyone is equipped with a handheld convergence device that provides immediate access to everything stored on the Web? When the open-course movement succeeds in putting together free, online curricula for all areas of the undergraduate curriculum, taught by the best teachers of our time? When Google finishes scanning every book ever printed and the results are available to the curious the world over 24/7?

I do not know how these questions will be answered by administrators, teachers, students, and parents in the years ahead. But for anyone interested in literacy, the making of meaning, the movement across time of our hardwired drive to narrate, this is anything but an apocalyptic moment. It is a time that invites invention, creativity, improvisation, and experimentation. At Rutgers, we have put together an immersive learning environment where students are producing collaborative explorations of what a multimedia visual essay might be. We have chosen the nonexistent genre of the visual essay because, while multimedia composition has been used for decades to sell stuff, to tell stories, and to report the news, it has not been used to fulfill the other primary responsibility of the university—namely, to promote the generation of new ideas. Here again, as with its written counterpart, the visual essay is a means to forestall argumentation in order to pursue the kinds of insights that emerge via deliberation, speculation, and meditation.

By design, the space we have created for this work—the Plangere Culture Lab—does not function like any classroom the students or the teachers have been in before. Though the lab is kitted out with a bunch of high technology to facilitate composing with still images, video, and sound, the emphasis is not on the glitzy gizmos and their magical powers. Instead, we emphasize the eventual ordinariness of the work we are doing. We tell the students we can foresee a time—not necessarily in the distant future—when entry-level composition will involve working with a video editor rather than a word processor, a time when the final document will not be a paper sub-

mitted to the teacher but rather a piece published to a site like YouTube and shared with the class as a whole. We tell the students that the video editor is a technology for extending thought, just like writing, and that the work of the lab is to explore and exploit its potential. In the Plangere Culture Lab, the emphasis is on producing examples of what it might mean to make the process of thinking visible.

My collaborators and I know what we do not want to be doing. We are determined to move beyond the advertisement, the public service announcement, the music video, the documentary, and the feature length movie—the genres established before multimedia composition was brought within the reach of anyone who had a laptop. But we also want to move beyond the early versions of multimedia academic content that now populate the Web: talking-head videos, unedited vodcasts and podcasts of lectures, material that is not shaped through postproduction. What we are doing now is figuring out how to live and work and think in the collaborative composing space. And so we have brought in lab mentors, interns, and undergraduates to think creatively with us about what it would mean to generate idea-driven visual content that has a place in the university. (The results of our ongoing efforts to produce what we are currently terming “an idea portfolio” can be seen at www.youtube.com/user/newhumanities and www.youtube.com/plangereculturelab.)¹

No, the apocalypse is not really at hand.

What is approaching is an opportunity to redefine the pedagogical function as promoting a tolerance for ambiguity, as cultivating informed curiosity, as encouraging connective thinking about multivariant real-world problems, as preparing students to think and communicate in and with the most powerful medium of our time.

Who would not want to be involved with that?

Note

1. Just as the commonplace “cut and paste” command has challenged assumptions about what it means to write in the digital environment, the search engine has challenged assumptions about the necessity of citation. A URL, like the one here, is a form of citation—albeit one that is not functional in a print document. What purpose is served by providing print citations for materials that are freely available on the Web? Is there a reader out there who would type in a screen-long http address, full of numbers and characters, signifying nothing? Surely it is much more efficient simply to invite the

reader to do an online search—for *Reading at Risk*, say, or David Wiley, and let the conversation open itself up. Of course, in certain corners of the university, to set aside concerns with plagiarism and citation is tantamount to declaring oneself indifferent to truth and justice. Conventions change, though, and that is an opportunity, too—to focus attention on how to make meaning with words and images.

Works Cited

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This article looks to a future where multimedia composing is the norm. While this paradigmatic shift in the cultural locus of literate activity will require the university to change, it also provides a rich opportunity for pedagogical innovation.

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